

HackSlash: Flower Duet

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Summary: Cassie finds that you can only defeat a powerful foe when your heart is in the fight.

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\_Cassie finds that you can only defeat a powerful foe when your heart is in the fight. \_

\_[Author's Note: This story follows the story\_ Love and Death in a Small Town,\_ and completes the trilogy which began with the crossover story \_Slasher Road.]

\* \* \*

><p>"So," said Cassie, as she inspected the qualifications and awards on the wall, "you're the best head-doctor in Omaha, right?"<p>

"That's what the pieces of paper say," said Dr Wilenski.

"How much do you usually charge?" said Cassie.

Dr Wilenski told her.

Cassie sighed. "I suppose you realise that I can't pay that," she said.

"I assumed that, when you burst in here with a gun and tied me to my chair with the phone cord," said Dr Wilenski.

"Technically, I did not 'burst in'," said Cassie. "I tricked my way past your receptionist and only pulled the gun when I was in here. And I wouldn't have pulled the gun at all, and tied you up, if you

hadn't gone for the taser in your drawer."

"If I promise not to touch for the taser, will you untie me?"

"Of course not. Now, aren't you supposed to ask me to lie down on the couch and then say 'what seems to be the problem?' Something like that?"

Dr Wilenski sighed. "Okay, if you insist," she said. "Ms â€| what is your name, anyway?"

"Hack," said Cassie.

"Won't you lie down on the couch and tell me all about it. Start at the beginning."

"No, I won't start at the beginning, because then we'd be here for a week," said Cassie. "I'll start a few days ago, when Vlad and I arrived in Omaha."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Three days earlier<strong>

"The news reports said that the bodies were all found in this area," said Cassie. "In fact, if you draw the locations on a map, which I did, these blocks here are about the centre."

"Hrr," said Vlad.

"So now we wait," said Cassie.

They were in the van in a dark alley. A cold grey rain was coming down.

They waited for an hour. Then three men in overcoats shuffled by, their collars pulled up and their hats pulled down.

Vlad rolled down the window and sniffed the air.

"Hellspawn," he said. "Slasher helpers."

They got out of the van and followed the hellspawn. It wasn't difficult: hellspawn were not that bright at the best of times, and despite their liking for human coats and accessories they didn't exactly blend in with the general population. There was the burned-garbage smell, for one thing. And the fact that they looked like a particularly feral form of garden gnome. But they were tough creatures, and dangerous in a fight, and stubbornly loyal to whoever they were assigned to.

They were heading out of the block that Cassie had identified as the likely centre. They even passed a few lone pedestrians, who would usually attract their attention. The three of them were going somewhere.

They stopped outside a flower shop. It was in the process of closing. The hellspawn waited until the last customer had left and then went in, pushing aside the owner.

"Flowers," said Vlad. "Better smell."

"Odd thing for them to want, though," said Cassie. "Let's go."

They ran across the road and into the store.

One of the hellspawn had a knife at the throat of the store owner, a youngish man who looked totally astonished at the idea of anyone stealing flowers. The other two hellspawn were ignoring the cash register, and were scooping up armfuls of flowers.

Cassie drew her Glock pistol from the pocket of her coat. "Step away from the flowers," she said. "And I won't shoot you. Probably."

The two hellspawn looked at her. "Warrior woman," muttered one of them. "Must tell the boss."

"Not seeing any putting down of flowers," said Cassie.

The two hellspawn did so. Cassie turned to the other one, the one with the knife. "You too," she said to him.

"You shoot me, I cut him," snarled the hellspawn.

Cassie shrugged. Then she shot him " in the eye. The impact knocked him off his feet.

"Holy shit!" said the florist.

"They are not holy, these," said Vlad. "The opposite."

The other two hellspawn charged at her. She shot one in the chest and Vlad punched the other, sending him flying across the store. But all three were getting up.

Cassie switched the gun to auto mode and fired a burst, hitting all three of them as they came at her. But one of them " the one she had shot in the eye " reached her, knocking her down and scratching her face. The other two ran for the door. "Vlad, you follow those guys!" she shouted. "I can take this one!" Vlad ran after them.

The hellspawn had her down and was trying to bite her. But she got a knee under him and threw him off. She fired again, and the volley of bullets knocked him down. He was up again in a moment, but he apparently decided that he had been shot enough for one night. He ran out into the rain.

Cassie went over to the florist guy, who had sagged to the floor.

"Hi," she said, helping him up. "You might not believe it, but I'm one of the good guys. Cassie. Hack. Cassie Hack. So you can call me " one of those."

"Hello," said the guy. "I'm Michael. What the hell were those things? And how did they just get up after you shot them? And why were they trying to steal flowers?"

"Huh," said Cassie. "Maybe there were really ugly thieves. With bulletproof vests. And I don't know."

Michael stared at her. "None of those answers make any sense," he said.

"Yeah," said Cassie, with a sigh. "I know."

He smiled. "Well, thanks, anyway," he said. "Here, let me clean that scratch." He picked up a little towel from the counter and began to wipe away the blood.

A police car pulled up outside.

"Ah," said Cassie. "But never when you need them. This â€¦ could be difficult."

"Over there," he said. "Stand behind the counter. Put on that cap and the apron."

Cassie did so.

The cops came in. "We had some reports of gunfire," one of them said.

"That's not uncommon around here," said Michael. "Nothing to do with me. I mean, us. Me and my â€¦ assistant. It's a flower shop, no shooting here. In fact, we were just about to close up."

Vlad came in.

"Lost 'em," he muttered. "Rain."

"And this is â€¦ the last customer for the evening," said Michael. "For â€¦ flowers."

"I like flowers," said Vlad.

"As everybody does," said Michael. "Well, I'm always glad to see the city's finest, but nothing to see here, maybe you should look somewhere else."

The two cops grunted and left.

Cassie took off the cap and apron. "That was pretty good," she said to Michael.

"Least I could do," he said. "No, wait, there's something else I can do." He held out a bunch of roses, wrapped in silver foil and tied with a red ribbon. "To thank you for saving me from â€¦ well, I'm not sure what. Something not good, I'm sure."

Cassie stared at them. She was not sure what to do.

Vlad nudged her.

"What?" said Cassie. "Oh, right, yeah, thanks a lot." She took them.

They said goodbye to Michael and started walking back to the van.

"Nice flowers," said Vlad. "He likes you. You should call him."

"Huh," said Cassie. "Well, I don't have a number for him."

Vlad handed her something. It was an advertising card for the flower store. There was a number.

\* \* \*

><p>"Tell me about Vlad," said Dr Wilenski.<p>

"Vlad?" said Cassie. "Huge guy. Incredibly strong. And huge. Not entirely normal. Spent most of his life in a basement, so I suppose that's understandable. We linked up a few years ago and have been chasing things that go bump in the night ever since."

"Shooting them?"

"Sometimes. Vlad prefers an axe for the close work and I like KISS IT."

"A favourite gun?"

"Baseball bat. I usually carry it with me but I don't have it at the moment. Otherwise I'd show it to you."

"Uh-huh," said Dr Wilenski. "So are you and Vlad a couple? Lovers? Just good friends? Work colleagues?"

Cassie shifted uncomfortably on the couch. "Something between those things," she said. "We occasionally do a sex thing. And he likes to watch me dress."

"And you like that he likes to do that?"

"Is that relevant?"

"You tell me."

Cassie lifted the gun and cocked it. "Don't get smart, doc," she said. "I'm not a woman known for a sense of humour and a forgiving attitude."

"I would say that you have persecution complex."

"Only because evil things keep trying to kill me," said Cassie, as she put the gun back into her coat pocket.

Dr Wilenski considered. "Anyway," she said. "What did you do with the number?"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Two days earlier<strong>

After a great deal of consideration, consternation and general stalling, she called the number on the card. To her surprise, Michael said that he was very glad she had called, and that he would like to meet her for coffee. Maybe later that afternoon.

"Uh, I don't know about that," she said.

"Hurr," said Vlad, next to her. "Cassie should go."

"Shut up," she said. "No, not you, Michael, I'm talking to Mr Subtle here. Uh, are you asking me on a date?"

"Guess I am," he said.

She thought about it. "Well, okay," she said eventually. They agreed on a time and place, and she hung up.

"You should wear the blue dress," said Vlad.

"No," said Cassie.

"It's pretty."

"No!" said Cassie.

"Why not?"

"I'll just wear my usual stuff. Maybe I'll try and look a bit less slutty than usual. Wash my hair. Probably should brush my teeth."

Vlad gave a grunt.

So a few hours later, Cassie was standing outside the café that Michael had mentioned. She had walked around the block three times and had started back to the van twice. But now she had decided that she would definitely, positively go in. She could see him sitting at a table, waiting for her.

She looked around. There was a little tingle in the hairs on the back of her neck. As if someone or something was watching her.

"Don't be a moron, moron," she said to herself. "No-one is going to be stalking you on a coffee date. If that's what this is."

She went in and met Michael and they shook hands and ordered coffee and Cassie tried not to feel really, really stupid. Michael asked her what she did with her life. She said that she drove around the country with Vlad killing things. Slashers, mostly.

"So that's why those guys last night called you a warrior woman," said Michael. "Were those things, what was the word, Slashers?"

"No, those were hellspawn," said Cassie. "Sometimes, when a Slasher comes back, whoever sends them and I really don't want to think about who that might be sends some assistants. Some Slashers are really just nasty types with a thirst for blood, much like what they were when they were alive, but tougher. Occasionally, you get one that has bigger plans, a real appetite for destruction. Unfortunately, those are the ones who get hellspawn helpers."

"Well, that doesn't sound like good news," said Michael. "But it

still doesn't explain why they were trying to steal my flowers."

"No," said Cassie. "No, it doesn't."

They had another cup of coffee, and then some things to eat. They talked about â€¦ stuff. Then Michael asked if she would like to go for a walk. Cassie surprised herself by agreeing. So they took a walk, nowhere special, just around the city, to the park, here and there. Eventually, they found themselves at Cassie's van.

"Home sweet home," said Cassie.

"Is your large friend around?" said Michael.

"He said he was going to patrol for hellspawn, and whatever."

"Well, please give him my regards. And thank him for telling you to call me and meet me."

"Oh, you knew about that, eh?"

"It's pretty obvious that he cares for you."

"Yeah," said Cassie. "Yeah, he does."

They looked at each other. Then he kissed her, gently, on the lips. It was a nice kiss, thought Cassie. Not meant to be sexy, not meant to be a come-on, just a â€¦ nice â€¦ kiss.

"I would like to see you again," he said.

"Uh, why?" she said. "I'm pretty hard to deal with."

"Maybe," he said. "But I think you're worth the effort."

She considered. "Yeah, okay," she said.

He smiled. And then walked away. When he was almost out of sight, he turned and waved. She gave a little wave back.

"Huh," she said to herself. She looked around. The hairs on her neck tingled again.

\* \* \*

><p>"It is clear to me," said Dr Wilenski, "that you have profound issues of persecution, abandonment, low self-esteem coupled with staggering arrogance, and sexual confusion, as well as a marked tendency for violence as a means of conflict resolution. Not to mention your paranoia and self-delusion. However, I don't really see what your problem is."<p>

"The thing," said Cassie, "is that I think I'm getting the offer of a normal life here. This guy seems to like me, not just want to bang me, and nothing I've told him about what I do and how I do it has made him turn and run."

"And the problem is â€¦ ?" said Dr Wilenski.

"The problem is that now I feel so mixed-up I want to puke," said Cassie. "And cry. And scream. And kill something. Especially kill something."

"Have you thought that maybe love has got something to do with it?"

"I've only just met Michael. We've had exactly one date, and it was just coffee and a walk."

"That is not what I said," said Dr Wilenski. "But tell me more about this Slasher person you claim to believe in."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>One day earlier<strong>

Cassie and Vlad were checking the area, building by building and street by street. Most of it was warehouses and crumbling tenements. There was a big sign saying that the whole place was scheduled for demolition and redevelopment by something called Osborne Real Estate Enterprises. But the sign itself was old and tattered. Looked like the project had fallen into a hole somehow.

It was night. They were standing in a little park, looking at the map that Cassie had drawn up.

"If there's anything to find, it will have to be one of these warehouses," she said. "There's still a half-dozen of them to check. They all look pretty decrepit, the sort of place that Slashers and hellspawn might like."

"My, aren't you the clever ones," said a voice. A man walked out of the shadows. He was wearing a business suit, but he was definitely a Slasher. One of the manicured, handsome, articulate ones. They were usually the worst. And he had a half-dozen hellspawn with him.

"Ah," said Cassie, drawing her gun. "And you are â€| ?"

"Osborne," said the Slasher.

"Would that be the failed property developer Osborne?" said Cassie.

"I didn't fail!" snapped Osborne. "I just â€| didn't succeed. But now there is a much more interesting â€| redevelopment option â€| on the horizon. Possibly not too far away at all. Think of it as rezoning." He patted the leather folder that he was carrying. No, not a folder, more like a ledger. Or a book. An old, odd-looking one.

"And Mr Fail came here to boast about his business smarts?" said Cassie.

"Not at all," said Osborne. "I came here to test you. See for myself."

The six hellspawn charged forward, straight for Cassie. Immediately, Cassie fired, bringing three down. But she knew that they would not stay down for long, not while they still had their heads. Her gun clicked on empty. She threw it aside and took KISS IT from its



holster. She swung, and another hellspawn went down.

Vlad had taken down two. He picked one up and hurled it into the darkness. There was a cry as it hit the ground in the distance.

The ones Cassie had shot were getting up. She smashed one, and then another.

"Well, I can see they were right when they told me you were a warrior woman," said Osborne. "Which is just what I need. So I'll be seeing you."

"Anytime," said Cassie. "Sooner rather than later works for me."

Osborne smiled a Slasher smile. "Okay, boys," he said. "That's enough, time to go home." The hellspawn picked themselves up and followed Osborne into the darkness.

"Peculiar," said Vlad.

"Damn right," said Cassie.

Her phone rang. It was Michael.

"Hey, you'll never guess what's happened," he said. "I've been robbed. I guess it was the same â€| guys. They took every flower in the place."

"Huh," said Cassie. "We'll drop around." She hung up and conveyed the news to Vlad.

"Peculiar-er," he said.

\* \* \*

><p>"Tell me something," said Dr Wilenski. "Why didn't you wear the blue dress? When you were going to meet Michael."<p>

"What?" said Cassie.

"I believe you heard."

"Don't make me shoot you, doc."

"Then answer the question."

"Because â€| I didn't feel like it."

"And why was that?"

Cassie sat up and looked at the doctor. "I don't like this," she said.

"I know," said Dr Wilenski.

Cassie realised that Dr Wilenski was no longer bound by the phone cord. She had managed to work her way out of it. By the look of things, she had actually done it a while ago. But she made no attempt to escape, or call for help. There was no sign of the taser. She was

just looking at Cassie, waiting for a reply.

"This is silly," said Cassie. "I'm leaving."

"Yes, you can do that," said the doctor. "But you came here for a purpose, Ms Hack. An answer. And the question is: why didn't you wear the blue dress?"

A tear ran down Cassie's cheek. Then another.

"Because â€¦ because â€¦ " she stammered. "I â€¦ I don't know â€¦"

"I think you do."

"Because â€¦ it's for him! It's for Vlad! It's only for Vlad! Because he gave it to me, and I'd never been given anything before! Because I â€¦" " She burst into tears.

Suddenly, there was a scream from the outer office. Then the door flew open with a crash. Osborne and a troop of hellspawn came charging in.

They were on Cassie before she could even draw her gun. In a few seconds, she was bound and they were hauling her out the door. She looked at Osborne. "You know that I'm going to kill you, right?" she said.

"Wrong," he said. He hit her, so hard she lost consciousness.

Osborne turned to Dr Wilenski. "Sorry to interrupt what was obviously a private moment," he said to her. "But something world-shaking is about to happen, and warrior woman here has an important role to play. Hate to kidnap and run, but I daresay her large friend with the axe will show up soon, given his habit of following her around." He gestured to one of the hellspawn. "You can kill and eat the doctor here," he said. "Whatever you like. Hate to leave any loose ends in what is essentially a solid business deal."

Then he was gone, and Dr Wilenski found herself confronted by a hellspawn with an evil, gap-toothed grin. The creature leaned over her, and Dr Wilenski saw that it had claws instead of fingernails. It reached out for her.

And she zapped it with the taser. She had hidden it in her sleeve. It screamed and fell to the floor, jerking with the current. She hit it again, and then again.

"I don't know what you are, but fuck you," she said, preparing to zap it again.

There was the sound of heavy footsteps. The biggest man she had ever seen came into the office.

"Vlad?" said Dr Wilenski.

"Where is Cassie?" said Vlad.

"They took her," said Dr Wilenski. She was shaking. She managed to

take a pack of cigarettes from the drawer of her desk and light one. "Those â€¦ putrid â€¦ things. I don't know where. Or why."

Vlad looked at the hellspawn on the floor. It was starting to regain consciousness. "Maybe this one can tell us," he said. "But they don't like to talk. Even if you ask them â€¦ firmly."

Dr Wilenski went to a cupboard and opened it. There were shelves of drugs in little bottles. She took out one of the bottles, and used it to fill a syringe. "This stuff," she said, "will make anyone tell you anything you want to know. Even if they're not human."

\* \* \*

><p>Cassie slowly drifted back to consciousness. She was bound tightly, hands and feet. She was on some sort of table. But she could smell â€¦ flowers. Goddamn flowers. They were around her and under her.<p>

"Yes, I admit it's odd, but dark forces often move in mysterious ways," said Osborne, leaning over her. He held up the book she had seen before. "It's all in here, you know. The ritual. 'The warrior woman, the scourge, the enemy of us all â€¦' that's you â€¦' must be put to death by a sword from the sky on a bed of flowers.' Bit silly, if you ask me, but that's what the book says. If it was up to me, I'd just tear your throat out."

Cassie glanced at the book. "Amazon?" she said.

"No, it was given to me when I was â€¦ away. By my â€¦ new employer. Don't you want to know what the ritual will do?"

Cassie yawned.

"It will open a gate," he said. "You know, only a couple of dozen hellspawn came with me. Once the gate is open, there will be scores, hundreds, thousands, more. And as many Slashers as Hell can spit out."

"Uh-huh," said Cassie. She looked around. They were on the edge of the balcony level of a warehouse. Below them was the main floor area of the building. She looked up. Overhead, a sort of crane was moving slowly along a beam. The crane was holding an industrial-size blade.

"Yes, that's the blade part," said Osborne. You see how it's going to work? It gets to the point where it's immediately overhead, and then the blade drops, and no more Cassie Hack. But you'll be famous for the gate thing. Hey, maybe you'll come back as one of our guys. I think you'd make a helluva Slasher."

"If I do," said Cassie, "the first spine I'll break will be yours."

There was a sound from the other end of the warehouse. The heavy door was being pushed open. There was a strangled cry, the sound of a hellspawn being crushed. There was the flash of an axe-blade, cutting a hellspawn in two.

"What the fuck!?" said Osborne. "How the hell did he find us?"

"Now you've made him mad," said Cassie. "You're screwed."

Vlad picked up a pair of hellspawn and smashed them together. But more were coming at him. A lot more.

"Your big friend will fall," said Osborne. "He can't fight them all."

Vlad was wielding the axes with brutal, deadly efficiency as he made his way across the warehouse floor, coming towards Cassie.

But the hellspawn were clambering over him, punching, clawing, biting. He began to stagger under their weight. He started to go down.

"Vlad!" shouted Cassie.

He looked up at her.

"I won't let you go!" she shouted. "I won't!"

He heaved himself up. He smashed out with the axes, tearing hellspawn from his back and throwing them the length of the warehouse.

"He can't," muttered Osborne. He screamed out: "Stop him! STOP HIM!"

But the hellspawn's attack was wavering now. Some of them were beginning to shrink back into the shadows. Vlad was bloody and bruised but he was still coming. He was not going to be stopped.

Osborne turned to Cassie. He leaned over her, peering into her face. "What is it with you people?" he said. "You must know that you can't win. Eventually, you're going to lose. One day."

"Maybe," said Cassie. "But not today."

Then, with all the strength she could muster, she head-butted him in the face. She heard bones break. He cried out in pain and staggered back. Cassie rolled off the table and onto the floor, and then over the edge of the balcony. A second later, the blade crashed down.

She was falling, falling, trying to not scream.

Vlad threw down the axes and ran. He stretched out his arms. He leaped.

And then he had her. They fell and skidded along the floor.

They rolled to a halt. She was still in his arms.

"Hi," she said.

"Hurr," he said. He pulled a knife from his belt to cut the ropes binding her. Then he took KISS IT from the holster on his back and handed it to her. And her back-up pistol.

She smiled. "Let's rock and roll," she said.

"Yes," said Vlad. "Rock. Roll." He picked up his axes.

There was still a dozen hellspawn confronting them. But not for long.

Cassie and Vlad ran out of the warehouse. They knew that Osborne and the remaining hellspawn would be after them in moments.

There were two people waiting for them at the end of the street. Michael and Dr Wilenski.

"All ready," said Michael to Vlad. "It's all around the warehouse."

Cassie saw that there was a column of petrol on the road, and a half-dozen empty drums. It looked as if Michael and Dr Wilenski had used the flower-delivery van to douse the whole area.

"Good to see you, doc," said Cassie.

"And to think that today started out so quietly," said Dr Wilenski.

Osborne came charging out of the warehouse, with a troop of hellspawn. They were screaming for blood.

"Uh, this would be a good time to light the petrol," said Cassie, as she reloaded.

"Do it, Vlad," said Michael.

"No matches," said Vlad.

"Well, don't look at me," said Michael.

"Oh, for crying out loud!" said Dr Wilenski. "Some people never think ahead!" She took her lighter from her pocket, snapped a flame, and threw it.

The petrol went up in a blue flash, around Osborne and the hellspawn. The warehouse started to catch.

Osborne came staggering out of the flames, his clothes and flesh ablaze. He reached out for them.

Cassie drew her pistol and fired. Again and again. A full clip. Osborne fell, still on fire. Cassie smashed his head with KISS IT until there was nothing left.

"Told you," said Cassie to him.

"I don't know about the rest of you," said Dr Wilenski, "but I could really like a serious drink."

\* \* \*

><p>Vlad was sitting in the driver's seat of the van, alone. He had been sitting there for some time, thinking. Finally, he started the engine and put the van into gear.<p>

The passenger-side door opened. Cassie climbed in.

"And just where do you think you're going!?" she said. "Don't tell me that you were planning to leave without me!"

Vlad stared at her.

"You and Michael," he said. "Cassie could be happy."

"What, you think so?" she said. "You really think that I would go for a handsome guy, a steady income, and a safe and secure life, when I could have this crappy van, a life on the road, and the knowledge that any day could be the last? Puh-leeze."

"Cassie could be happy," Vlad repeated. "Cassie could be loved. Cassie could have a home."

She was quiet for a long moment. Then she said: "I don't know much, Vlad. God knows that I have an awful lot to learn and an awful lot to work out. But I know what I have. I know that I'm already loved. And I know that my home is right here. With you." She leaned across and kissed him on the lips. He smiled. So did she.

"I don't know where this road is going," said Cassie. "Let's find out."

END AND AMEN

End  
file.